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Petroushka
A Ballet Conception by Waslaw Nijinsky.

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THE IMMORTAL PETROUSHKA

MORE than one hundred and fifty years have gone by since Petroushka was banished by respectable society and expelled from the realm of art. The theatre of to-day passes indifferently that inimitable rascal with the thick layer of rouge upon his distorted ugly face, the face of an actor who in the past for many generations had been the sole entertainment of our forefathers.

Only through the friendship of children has he been saved from complete oblivion. They have always been his ardent admirers. But for them he would for a long time have been tramping the city's streets in cold and rain, or rambling through the country fairs, his lips again and again repeating the weary jokes of yesteryear.

Now, thanks to the children, he is not homeless. Many cities have built theatres for him and, as in the days of long ago, the immortal jester goes through his antics before appreciative audiences of youngsters. Petroushka the pedagogue! Petroushka in the rôle of an educator! The restless mountebank, the lover of vulgar gestures, he behaves now correctly as a gentleman. Time has tamed him and he has become chaste and modest. He has been softened, simplified and

polished, and his language has lost its past brilliance and colour, and in his funny monologues there is not any longer the careless joyousness of other days.

Petroushka has been widely known, but in different epochs he assumes different names. The harmless Neapolitan clown, *Pulcinello*; the frivolous French juggler, *Polichinelle*; the English *Punch*; the Russian merry-andrew *Petroushka*; the haughty Spaniard, *Don Cristobal Pulcinella*; the Viennese *Hanswurst*, and the thoughtful reasoner *Picklebäring*—they are all the same face under different masks and names. This universal hero of the puppet-show had in the past made himself more famous than any of the pathetic knights, fakirs and giants, and the puppet comedy had thus become a whimsical picturing of the immortal Petroushka.

In the cultured life of the XVII and XVIII centuries, puppet-shows played an important rôle and were a serious menace to the regular dramatic troupes of those days. The *Comédie française* had fought against "*concurrence déloyale*" of the marionette theatres and frequently appealed to the crown to issue royal decrees to close them. Almost every city in Europe had its permanent theatres of

marionettes: *Fantocini français* in Paris, *Teatro Fiando* in Milan, *Powell* in London, *Shütz und Dreir* in Berlin.

The plain folk liked it best, yet neither the well-to-do nor the intellectual aristocracy were averse to these puppet comedies. It is well known that Cervantes liked puppet-shows; that George Sand was enthusiastic over her "*théâtre des amis*." Le Sage wrote over three hundred plays for the 'theatre,' Haydn composed operas for them and Voltaire, the great Voltaire! built a *théâtre marionette* in the Castle of Cirey! "*Une théâtre et une salle des marionettes à Cirey. Ob c'est drôle! Mais qu'y-a-t-il d'étonnant! Voltaire est aussi aimable enfant que sage philosophe*,"—wrote Madame de Graffigny.

Surely this marionette theatre must have been something more than an amusing pastime to be able to draw to itself the attention of such cultured minds as those of that "*aimable enfant*" Voltaire, Goete, Dickens, Chaucer, Byron, Addison, and a host of others. There must have been some hidden meaning in that absurd buffonade of Petroushka.

This odd theatre featuring Petroushka, whose witty remarks reflect in a distorted way the whole universe, produces an impression of a deliberately drawn caricature of humanity on a grand scale. The miniature theatre with its automatic actors invites a comparison with the theatre of history, wherein humanity by the will of a mysterious theatrical manager is called to perform its part in a play that has neither beginning nor end; a play that is both a tragedy and a jovial devil's burlesque. With comic profundity, as though the fate of the universe depended on them, these mechanical people, tied to strings, perform their heroic deeds or crimes and play their roguish tricks. They make expressive gestures, they

speak noble and pathetic words, they rejoice, suffer, laugh, cry, and, having finished their parts, retire from the stage. The curtain falls and the hand of the invisible mechanic who had set them in motion piles them indiscriminately away in a heap in some dark corner behind the scenes—the villain next to smiling innocence, the King beside the swine-herd.

The pathos of the speeches and gestures of these automatic heroes are at times full of irrepressible comicality, and at other times the harmless, childish theatre assumes a sardonic, grotesque character. Certainly, virtue is rewarded on this stage, and sin is invariably punished; the evil spirits drag away the impious Faust; Petroushka is thrown into a dungeon for his knavery; the virtuous wife returns to her loving husband and the much affected Petroushka proclaims before the curtain that the comedy is ended.

Little is known of the date of Petroushka's birth. Some historians claim that his father was the hunchback *Maccus* of the ancient tragedy. On the whole, it appears that his geneological tree is quite old and perhaps of mythical origin. In the marionette theatres of India there is the *Vidusaka*; the Turkish *Karagetz* is Petroushka's twin brother, and so is the good-natured *Til Eulenspiegel*. This juggler, ne'er do-well and sage can certainly boast of an illustrious family connection. Sancho Pancha and Leperello are his god-fathers and Sir John Falstaff is his near relative. Why, even in the veins of the noble prince Hamlet there is a drop of the plebeian blood of the clown.

But under all the disguises and masks, Petroushka's real nature as that of a rogue, sceptic and mocker remains everywhere the same, with little or no variations. Under the bleak skies of the north he is a melancholic reasoner, a wise jester of the delicate Shakespearean humor,

dealing in thoughts only of the highest order. "Where am I, what am I, who am I"—asks the German Petroushka having no doubt tasted of the German philosophic tree of knowledge.

That Petroushka is continually in love must be taken as an indication of his peculiar bringing up. It is no secret that he passed his youthful years under the burning skies of Italy where love is regarded as something natural and is looked upon without the slightest tinge of worldly hypocrisy.

At the beginning of his artistic career Petroushka had met, during a village festival, the little coquette Colombine "*piccola ma tutta pepe!*" He invited her to dance, and while dancing the tarantella declared his love for her and was at once accepted. In the midst of the general carousing he offers her his hand and heart and leads her to the altar. Colombine loves her roguish Petroushka and resignedly bears the many burdens of nomadic life. She resists temptations and is faithful to him.

*"Non lascio mai mio Polecenella
Per corona di re. Io so' schiva!"*

But, alas! Having tasted the pleasures of the gay Parisian life, the light-headed beauty, enticed by fine gifts, leaves her friend one dark night. Oh, poor Petroushka! He is still hopeful of winning her back and so he comes before her window and sighs and sings in the clear moon:

*"Au claire de la lune
Mon ami Pierrot."*

Disappointment in love is not the only thing that darkens Petroushka's existence. From the very cradle, life has been his stepmother and kicks and blows fall continually upon him. It is his luck. He does not take everything to heart, otherwise he might become a misanthrope. Heaven and earth conspire

against him and the law does nothing but inflict heavy sentences in punishment for his innocent tricks. Besides, the whole world holds that he is a shameless thief, a sluggard and a rascal. But Petroushka is not a rascal; he merely finds no pleasure in work and in this he anticipates romanticists with the difference that he persistently and in principle practices the art of exquisite leisure.

Volumes might be written about Petroushka's roguish pranks. In the art of cheating, deceiving, duping and playing the fool—he beats the devil himself, the father of knavery. Petroushka cheats Death when he comes after his soul; he keeps Death locked up so that people cease to die, and in the end gives him a good beating. He also dupes his master, eats up his dinner, steals his clothes, and through all has the audacity to laugh at him. He steals everything he can lay hands on, and when found guilty, shamelessly denies the crime and gets away with a few jokes.

Petroushka has tried almost every profession on earth with little success, though; everywhere he is discharged either for laziness or for trickery.

At one time he occupied himself as an armour-bearer to a travelling knight with whom he starved and played tinker in the remotest part of a castle. Under the name of Til Eulenspiegel he was a travelling artizan. He was also a jester to a necromancer, a certain doctor Faustus, and accompanied the latter in his voyage to Parma. It was when serving Dr. Faust that Petroushka went through the most wonderful and thrilling experience of his life. Petroushka besides being superstitious and cowardly is more curious than a woman, and because of his curiosity he frequently gets into scrapes. Through a keyhole he spied out his master's ancient folios that were chained

to the wall; and in his master's absence he stole into the chamber and attempted to spell out the strange Latin script of the volumes. In the course of this he came upon that magic word "*perlippe*" which placed in his hands the power to conjure evil spirits. But, whereas the master for the knowledge of that art sold to the devil his soul and body, his shrewd servant, Petroushka, was more prudent and refused to sign the contract with the evil one. "The body," says Petroushka, "I need for myself, and as for the soul, Petroushka has no such thing! When I was born souls were rather scarce."

Petroushka is still alive, though he has trotted the globe over on foot, on horseback, on a chanticleer, on a dragon, on a dolphin, in a magic sausage; has been in a whale's belly, has visited every country under the sun; has gone as far as the tropics; accumulating a great deal of earthly wisdom and . . . hard knocks. Travelling has sharpened his wits, made him a cultured, unprejudiced, philosopher and a free thinker. The superstitious Petroushka of the olden time, who used to tremble and cross himself at

the mere mention of an evil spirit, is no more. To-day he believes not in dreams, pokes fun at everybody and is a match for the 'father of lies' himself.

Why should people insist upon calling Petroushka a fool? Does he not rather play the fool to hoax the audience, this inveterate realist and sceptic? With his deep-rooted conviction that the whole world is a tragi-comical spectacle wherein he plays the part of the one who gets the kicks and whose ears are boxed, while to others more pleasing parts are assigned. To do him justice, Petroushka proclaims his likes and dislikes quite openly and for it he is assailed by society, law and the police. . . .

Epochs and beliefs, topics and names may come and go, but this romantic chimera in which so many subtle fantasies and vulgar realisms are interwoven,—refuses to leave the stage of the marionette theatre. The whole puppet show is then a whimsical setting forth of the adventures of the immortal Petroushka.

By S. ASHKINAZI,

From Yejegodnik Imperatorskich, Teatrov, Petrograd.

(Translation, Lotus Magazine.)